

# Supporting Adolescents



*by Patty Wipfler*

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## Teenagers Are Marvelous!

Teenagers are marvelous people. They are smart, they are creative, they have high hopes and great energy. Each young person has his or her unique perspective which lends fresh genius to the human community. And each young person is searching for meaning in his life. Each teenager wants some way to be himself, to be seen for who he is. We have in our teenagers a real treasure, an unfolding source of intelligence and high spirits.

Yet many people, including parents, have a strong negative attitude toward adolescents. I remember when my older son was approaching his thirteenth birthday, people would often say something like “It’s nothing but downhill from here!” or “Get ready for raging hormones!” What is even more surprising and heartbreaking is that this attitude is seldom questioned. It is as if we have all agreed to expect the worst from teenagers.

There is no reason to back away from our children just because they have become teenagers. We parents of teenagers know our children. These are the children who ran from across the schoolyard to hug us. These are the children we rocked in the night, the children we read to at bedtime for years, the children who cried for us when we went away. These are the children who couldn’t wait to snuggle with us on weekend mornings. They are good people. They love us. We love them. And we have a vital role to play in their lives as they make their way toward adulthood.

## Becoming Allies to Our Teenagers

Our relationships with our teenagers are vital. Our children have grown, they are more independent, and the early years of immediate need for our attention have passed. But their need for our love, appreciation, closeness, and open interest in them is still great. Our attitude toward them—spoken and unspoken—can still make or break their day. They are looking for our respect. They want us to

understand them and the choices they make. There is still much of importance for us to do.

Our teenagers have spent over a decade learning about how the world works from a child's perspective. Now, with adulthood approaching, the scope of their thinking must undergo a tremendous expansion. They now have to refigure everything.

They are setting up the foundation for their lives as adults. It is important to them that they come up with their own thoughts and understandings. They must develop their own ways of handling their lives. Our teenagers are smart and they know this. There are times when they reject our well-meant advice because they know they must build their own understanding of their world.

When our attempts to help them are turned down, we parents can easily feel rebuffed. We tend to either back off entirely, or we get angry and keep trying to shoehorn our advice into our child. In fact, advice is not what our teenagers need from us.

Our teenagers want us to be their allies. They want us to be aware of the challenges they have to meet. They want us to listen to them, to work to understand them well. They want us to loan them our confidence when they feel unsure of themselves. But they don't want us to think *for* them.

When we parents think of our teenagers as "ours," we are likely to become confused about what our relationship with them should be. Our teenagers' lives are their own. It's not their job to make us proud—it's our job to take pride in them, however they may struggle. It's not their job to please us—it's our job to be pleased with them, even when their experiments aren't fully wise. It's their job to develop sound judgment, to take the initiative to make their own lives good, to learn the skills that bring them toward an independent life and livelihood. It's our job to support them in these efforts.

If we think of ourselves as the people they can turn to when their lives are exciting, confusing, or difficult, our role becomes clearer. We can't make them do things the way we would do them, but we can stand by them as they struggle to think for themselves. We can't inject good judgment into them, but we can set limits when poor judgment has them trapped. We can't protect them from all hard times, but we can be there to listen and care when they come home scuffed and scarred.

The role of parent as ally is an interesting, unique mix of jobs. Our role is to encourage our teenagers and to take pride in their efforts. Our role is to insist on course corrections, but only when absolutely necessary. An ally stays in good communication. An ally stands loyal and ready to lend a hand. An ally is on the lookout for situations that could become overwhelming. But an ally enters into the fray only when asked, or when a situation poses a clear danger. As our children's allies, we can care, we can listen, we can notice what is being learned, we can praise the good we see. We can set limits without reproach. We can stay in touch while our children learn, experiment by experiment, to handle their lives with strength and integrity.

## **Our Teenagers' Challenges**

Each teenager has his individual course to chart and his own personal challenges to meet. As he climbs out of childhood, a child's early interests develop into new ways of spending time. Where once there were overnights with best friends, there now are long conversations on the phone. Where once there were daring bicycle adventures there now are skateboard hangouts where best buddies meet and test their skill. As their opportunities to learn through play decrease, one of our teenagers' challenges is to keep pursuing and enjoying those things they love to do. The things they love may seem to have little to do with school or work or the onset of a serious adult life. But these are the activities that keep them hopeful about their lives. These are the activities that help them believe in themselves as they build on their strengths and try new things.

Those challenges that gave our children a tough time in childhood, like fear of the dark, or an inability to stick with a sports team through the season, or periodic discouragement with school, don't necessarily melt away in adolescence. Childhood fear of the dark can become adolescent refusal to sleep until two AM, and great grumpiness as a result. The child who couldn't handle his feelings when playing team sports becomes "unathletic," closing the door on certain kinds of teamwork and friendship. A child's early discouragement with school, which used to come and go, might settle in and drain his sense of wellbeing all year long. As our children reach their teen years, their response to persistent challenges can literally shape their personality.

In short, our teenagers each have their talents and enthusiasms. And each of them carries a unique set of personal unfinished business that often has its roots in their childhood experience.

In addition to their personal hurdles, each teenager faces challenges that arise from forces at work in the larger society. Racism, sexism, and bias based on social class are some of the obvious forces that loom, threatening to limit our children's lives. Pressure to conform to rigid expectations is great. It takes both vision and support for young people to succeed at building the lives they choose, instead of becoming confined to the roles allotted to them according to their race, gender or family income.

There is another important force that presses on our teenagers daily, sapping their energy and draining their confidence. Like racism and sexism, it is a set of harmful attitudes that go mostly unnoticed and unchallenged. This force is the misestimate and mistreatment—the oppression—of young people.

## **The Oppression of Young People**

Our children are born to us expecting love and a safe world around them. With trusting hearts, they expect adults to enjoy them, appreciate them, and to offer them kindness and assistance. Unfortunately, they're born into a world not yet ready to meet their

high expectations. They have frazzled parents who have to work too long and hard. They have overburdened teachers. They live in a society that hasn't decided that its young people are precious. It's a real shock to young people each time they find themselves less than welcome, less than treasured, or blamed when they need help.

The battle against the mistreatment of young people that teenagers face isn't new to them. They have had more than a decade of daily experience with being underestimated and undervalued by adults and by society. They've been nourished, but they've also been brushed aside. They've been helped, but they've also been hindered. The times adults haven't understood them or have blamed them for their troubles have left scars. It makes a big difference in the lives of teenagers if we parents understand that they operate in a climate that can be impersonal and often overtly hostile toward young people, toward them.

In brief, here's some of what young people are up against.

- **Teenagers aren't respected.**

In general, our society hasn't decided what teenagers are "good for." Adolescents are treated as though they are betwixt and between, blessed with no judgment and no significant contribution to make in community life, politics, work, or the arts. Adults rarely ask teenagers genuine questions about their experience or opinions. Adults rarely notice that there is much they can learn from teenagers. Adults expect teenagers to act more responsibly and to do more work without assistance, but grownups rarely expect teenagers to contribute ideas or to join in making important decisions. Usually, this is a sad continuation of the lack of respect teenagers endured as children, when instructions on what to do and when to do it were a mainstay of their interactions with adults.

Our years of adult life have gradually made this oppression of young people look normal to us. We don't notice that we don't consult teenagers, we don't notice that they are in school, listening

to adults for hours each day for reasons that are not their own. We take it for granted that our society demands that young people be ready to fight and die for their country. Young people see that they have been cordoned off in a narrow age group. They see that few adults believe that they are significant people now. We grownups don't notice these insults on a daily basis. Our teenagers do.

Perhaps the most damaging effect of this lack of respect for young people is that young people internalize this attitude. They begin to treat other young people with the same disrespect they themselves have been shown. Young people habitually belittle each other. Rejection of young people by young people runs rampant through our schools. A young person can expect to be rejected by his peers on the basis of his hairstyle, his skin color, his favorite sport, the side of town he comes from, what he eats for lunch, and where he sits at break time. At a time when every young person is searching for ways to understand himself, a barrage of senseless criticism awaits him, much of it coming from other young people. This is deeply hurtful. It compromises each teenager's ability to experiment and learn in safety.

- **Teenagers don't get to play freely anymore.**

In childhood, play in its freest form is the way children express their genius. They feel powerful, agile, creative, strong, and close to each other as they jump their bikes off homemade ramps or skip rope together on the sidewalk. Their whole intelligence is engaged. They can reach great heights of cooperation with other children as they make a large game unfold. After a playtime that goes well, your child knows in his very bones that he is good. Play is one of the key building-blocks of self-esteem.

But even before adolescence, most children have to give up their unstructured play time. Homework, jobs, and lessons eat into their time to pursue friendships and to come up with new and marvelous ways of being together. In many places, by the time

children reach high school it's not cool—and it may not even be safe—to play anymore. Goofing around, laughing with friends, creating games and fun out of nothing becomes rare. This lack of play, laughter, and lighthearted fun robs young people of one of the key ways human beings express their good will and their creativity. Less play means they get less immediate information about how good they are, and how fully they belong.

- **Teenagers are separated from simple affection.**

Parents and age-mates alike commonly withdraw from showing open affection when adolescence approaches. There's no more snuggling at bedtime, no more sitting on laps while talking, no more good-natured roughhousing on Saturday morning. Heartfelt affection is the cornerstone of close relationships and trust. The cultural habits and fears that pull us away from being affectionate with our teenagers create loneliness and self-doubt that can be almost unbearable. Remember?

If they can't be affectionate within their families or among their friends, teenagers who long for the reassurance of affectionate touch have almost no avenue open to them except sexual contact. And, as we know too well, much confusion, desperation, and danger surrounds sexual contact today. We pay a large price for our habit of excluding our teenagers from the kinds of warmth—cuddling, affectionate touch, playful wrestling—we gave them as children. We literally lose touch with them. And they lose the concrete evidence that we really care.

- **Teenagers face a confusing world.**

The world and its institutions don't make much sense to young people. It is deeply confusing to them to find their hopes dashed against situations that are harsh, unjust, or sadly mediocre. They were born for a finer life—more fun, more love, more cooperation, more adventure without peril, more invitations to make a difference, more praise for their brilliance. They expect—and want—a more rational world.



- **Teenagers lack models of genuine leadership.**

There is a real vacuum of leadership toward broadly human goals at every level of our society. Most adults act like they have no power to solve the ongoing conflicts that divide our communities and threaten our world. Without the example of hopeful, savvy adults who seed and sprout change, young people are left with the impression that they, too, are probably powerless to address vital issues and initiate change.

These are the grooves, carved deep into our habits and institutions, that are set up to carry our teenagers away from a life that pleases them and allows them to choose to learn, play, work, and make close friends. Recognizing these forces is a first step in supporting young people. There is more, much more, that we can do to take an active stance that counters these forces in our daily interactions with teenagers.

## **First Steps in Becoming an Ally to Your Teenager**

If you are a parent, you have loved your teenager from the beginning. You care. You know what he's been through. You are perfectly positioned to be his ally, except for one distinct drawback. Your teenager's choices—and his troubles—cause you to be upset, and while you are upset, you cannot really focus on your helping your teenager. While you are upset, your attention surges toward your own feelings, fears, and discomfort.

If you are the friend of one or of many teenagers, you can provide important perspective from outside the family. Your attention reminds a teenager that he or she is an important person in his or her own right. And your willingness to care can be of key importance: we forget how far from the warmth of adult approval most teenagers must live their lives. But you too will find that your fears and your upsets limit your ability to be an effective ally.

Much of learning to be an ally involves learning how to handle human upsets, young people's and our own. There are four basic steps we parents and friends\* of teenagers can take to offer them genuine help. They are:

- Separate our troubles from our teenagers' troubles.
- Learn to listen.
- Assist teenagers to heal from emotional hurt.
- Respect, support and enjoy them.

Let's look briefly at each of these steps. With the simple ideas outlined here, you can begin your own exploration of what it means to be an ally to your teenager. There aren't any hard and fast rules. You'll need to think afresh. If you use these directions like a compass, they'll point you in the direction of a warmer, closer relationship, however rugged the terrain.

## **Separate Your Troubles from Your Teenager's Troubles**

Our teenagers have very real troubles. Perhaps they can't stand their stepparent, or they choose friends who take advantage of them, or they become angry whenever we try to talk with them. Just about every teenager has significant rough spots in his life. And every teenager makes harmless choices that fly in the face of his parents' habits and tastes. Of course we have feelings about these things. It's our beloved children who are either caught in real troubles or are choosing to make waves right in front of us. We care!

If our goal is to be allies, to help our teenagers learn and gain command of their lives, we need to understand their point of view, their reasons for doing the things they do, their fears and upsets. And we can't get close enough to understand them if our own upsets are sticking out all over. As the parents of teenagers, then, we need to adopt a strategy of finding regular relief from our own upsets. If we work through our upsets first, we'll be in better shape to be thoughtful allies to our teenagers as they learn to live their own lives.

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*\* To simplify the text, I will speak to parents, although all the steps outlined here can be used just as effectively by friends from outside the family.*

- **We must build good support for ourselves.**

When we find ourselves getting upset, it's possible to set up an exchange of listening time with another caring parent. I call this a listening partnership. With a few simple ground rules—lots of warmth, no advice, no criticism, complete confidentiality—two people can exchange the favor of listening to each other. One talks first, at length, while the other listens warmly and offers encouragement. The listener doesn't try to solve the problem, but lets the person learn from his or her own thinking. Then, after an agreed-upon time has passed, the two trade roles, and the person who talked first becomes the listener.

This exchange of listening time is simple to do and immensely helpful. The chance to think and talk releases tension and brings new insights. It helps each parent feel less alone with his or her problems and frustrations. Over time, a listening partnership becomes a dependable opportunity to think, to let upsets show without fear of hurting loved ones, and to be appreciated for working so hard at parenting. The booklet *Listening Partnerships for Parents*, published by **Hand in Hand**, is designed to help parents set up these kinds of relationships. It describes in fuller detail how to be an effective listener, and how to use a listener to relieve the stresses of parenting.

- **We must work on our own issues.**

Teenagers have a kind of radar that picks up adult pretense loud and clear. We parents have our own difficulties, and our teenagers know very well what they are. They know when we are courageously facing our difficulties, and when we are pretending that we have none. To build close relationships with young people, we have to earn their respect by taking concrete measures to acknowledge our troubles and take charge of our lives. An "I'm better than you are" pose won't work: all of us have our challenges, and teenagers' standards for honesty and integrity are high.

In particular, parents of teenagers need to attend to a couple of almost universal parent issues.

- **We tend to confuse our teenagers and their behavior with other people and other times.**

Most of us find ourselves thinking at one time or another that our teenager's current experiences are surely just the same as other experiences we've known. For instance, if we have a child who has trouble making friends, we may become very sure that we know exactly how she feels—her experience is just like our own experience at the age of fifteen. Or we may watch our child ruin his chances to play basketball with his attitude on the court, and think that he is “just like his father” or “hotheaded like his mother.”

Any time we're sure that our child is just like someone else, ourselves included, we're being driven down a side track by feelings that have more to do with our experience than with our child's experience. It's time to find a listener and talk about the memories and feelings our child's behavior has stirred. We have unfinished business; perhaps it's stored grief about being a lonely teenager, or stored anger about an ex-spouse that is surfacing under the guise of concern about our child. Those memories and feelings need to be aired so we can separate them from the present situation. We won't understand our teenagers well until we remove this false cloak of familiarity. They need us to separate our past from their present. They need us to see them as people whose histories are unique, and whose futures are wide open.

- **We are tired.**

Parenting is not an easy job, and the work of parents is so poorly supported that by the time our children can stand and look us directly in the eye, most of us feel desperate for a rest. We want our children to be independent, not to make mistakes, not to have problems, not to need us for anything more. This exhaustion gets in our way of enjoying our teenagers. It mars our ability to

see their progress and to cheer them on. It makes our lives feel grim. When we feel tired, small difficulties can trigger enormous feelings.

These strong feelings usually have their origins in our childhoods, when indeed we were often in a one-down position, with no help at hand. Now that we are grown, the initiative lies with us. Whether we feel capable or not, we in fact have the ability to locate help, to get the information we need, to reach out with caring, to stand up for ourselves and our loved ones. When we feel too exhausted to meet one more challenge, we need a listener. We need someone to help us work our way toward releasing the heavy feelings that weigh on us. A listening partnership is just the place to laugh, cry, and rage about what's hard in our lives. This emotional release can help us regain the energy to take initiative and enjoy the challenges in our lives again.

## **Learn to Listen**

Listening is the cornerstone of a close relationship. It's the key skill you'll need to be an effective ally to your teenager. Listening connects people. Listening draws people closer. When a parent can listen, relaxed and interested, a teenager will, at his own chosen time, pour out his thinking and feelings. He'll tell you what he's observed. He'll spin out his conclusions and wonderings, and see how it all sounds as he tells it to you. In a way, your child's journey toward adulthood makes him feel like a stranger in a strange land. He won't have to navigate alone if you can listen as he works to make sense of things large and small.

- **To begin, make yourself available.**

To invite their child's confidence, most parents I know have found that making themselves available works well. This means hanging around, mildly occupied. For busy parents, it means making a commitment not to be busy for a chunk of time, as often as can be arranged. Being available may mean joining your son on the sofa while he watches TV, or bringing your magazine into your

daughter's room and plopping down quietly on her bed while she does her homework. It may mean lingering by the bathroom doorway for ten or fifteen minutes to see how your daughter does her hair and makeup, or showing an interest in your son's newest CD.

Asking probing questions at these times doesn't usually work. It's best to let our children open the line of conversation, if they choose to talk, and to follow the line they open. When we're worried, which is often, the questions we ask come straight out of our worries. We ask how their grade in History is coming along, or how long they expect to get by without doing their laundry. We tell ourselves we are ready to listen, but actually, we want to talk. We are concerned and we want them to know about it. This isn't real listening. If you find yourself hanging out with the intent to listen, but asking probing questions instead, set up another listening partnership and work on your concerns. Your worries are in the way of relaxed, child-directed communication.

- **Your teenager will talk to you when it feels safe, not when it's convenient.**

It may be days or weeks before your child is ready to talk about what's on his mind. And his idea of a good time to talk won't necessarily be convenient for you. That all-important sense of safety that lets people open their hearts is not something you can schedule to happen on Tuesday between dinner and ten PM. It will be up to you to notice when your child's thoughts begin to string together and it looks like he might keep right on talking. To build a connection between you, you'll need to be willing to drop your plans—doing the dishes, phoning Aunt Rosa, getting the lunches made for tomorrow—when your teenager begins to talk. It may help to go through the motions of making lunches so that your child doesn't suddenly feel on the spot, but your attention must move from getting things done to listening when your teen begins to talk.

- **When your teenager talks to you, listen. Don't give advice.**

When your teenager begins to talk, plant yourself close by. Relax. Let him or her direct the conversation. Keep your upsets and worries out of the picture. This is your teenager's time. He is sorting through his experience. You are furnishing warmth and confidence in him. He is letting you in on his thinking and his questions. No answers are needed. What your teenager does need are brief indications from you that you enjoy him, respect him, and know that he can come up with good answers. Those indications are far more valuable to him than any specific advice you might have the urge to give. When you are called upon to respond, show your interest and your confidence fully, but be brief. Any time you use more than a sentence, you've probably stopped listening.

- **Notice the times your teenager feels safe with you, and quietly promote these kinds of times.**

Another approach is to think carefully about the times your child does feel safe enough to talk to you. You can then make a point of being available at these times. For many teenagers, safety builds over any stretch of time when people are "around": available but not urgent to complete any particular agenda. I remember noticing that, although my teenagers didn't need me home during weekend days, our weekends were much warmer and closer when I stayed around than when I went off and worked. The expanse of casual time together was very important in rebuilding our connections with each other.

This was a marked change from how things worked when they were children. Then, any chunk of time during the day could serve to connect us well. I could play with them Saturday morning, have them stay with friends Saturday afternoon, and we'd still be pretty well connected on Saturday night. Short, intense playtimes were our channel of connection. These could be sparked anytime, anywhere. When they became teenagers, the

channel changed. As teens, they required good stretches of low-intensity grounding time. Our connections would knit invisibly as we shuffled around the kitchen on weekend mornings, went to the store together to buy barbecue chips, or worked together over a T-shirt stain that wouldn't come out.

The channels through which parents develop connections with their teenagers are unique and varied. Here are some examples. In each case, the parent was alert enough to notice how safety develops, and has then quietly promoted similar times to keep the safety current.

One mom sees her son lying on the sofa watching TV. She sits next to him, and he throws his legs over her. After twenty minutes or so, he'll ask her to rub his legs. After that, he'll ask her to do his arms, then his shoulders. Eventually, he'll turn off the TV and ask for a full backrub. As she rubs his back, he finally feels safe enough to talk about his life. The sentences come slowly, with long silences in between. He doesn't talk easily. The process goes best if she keeps working on his back. That way, he can tell she's not worried or urgent about finding solutions. Sometimes, it becomes safe enough for him to roll over and talk face to face, sometimes it doesn't. So this mother learned to see her son lying on the sofa watching TV, notice the opportunity at hand, unplug the telephone, plop down next to him, and plan to be there for the next hour or so.

Another mother comes into her son's room late in the evening to hang out. She brings her reading and sits on his bed while he does his homework. At some point, he might ask her to listen to the music he's interested in. As she listens, he feels encouraged and talks at length between songs. Sometimes he asks her to lie on the floor next to him, with the speakers placed "just so" for maximum stereo effect, to listen to his favorite songs. As they listen, he feels safe enough to be moved by the music, and by sharing it. These are very close times. She tries to visit him during homework time at least once a week.



Another mother I know noticed that sometimes when she and her daughter were in the car (she took her for dental appointments regularly), she could begin to talk and even cry on the way home about how hard things were at school. One day when this happened, the mother had the presence of mind to head the car into the hills nearby, instead of going directly home. Their car ride became an hour-long journey, which allowed her daughter to continue to talk and cry in a safe place. In the car, the mother's attention wasn't so direct as to freeze her daughter into covering her feelings. It worked well for the mother, too. When she was occupied with driving, she could manage not to try to "fix it." She simply listened and let her daughter release the feelings she had stored inside. Thereafter, when the daughter would start talking in the car, this mother would take a slow way home to allow for a good long talk or cry.

I also know many parents who have noticed that very late at night on weekends (when the aggravation of school isn't quite so strong), their teenagers can talk more easily and at length. So they wait up till their children come home, invite them in to watch the last of the late movie or to have a bite to eat or to plop on the bed, and often, talking can begin.

- **Remember that important talk begins with topics that may seem unimportant.**

When your teenager begins to talk, the subject of the conversation probably won't be something you consider important. He will first choose a subject he feels safe talking to you about. You will be hoping for a subject of importance to surface. You'll want your son to talk about why he's getting a D in geometry, or you'll want your daughter to talk about how badly she feels that she had to wear hand-me-down shoes to the winter dance. But what your teenager can safely talk to you about is which T-shirt he wants to buy next, or whether or not she should braid her hair. Hang in there! If you listen well, your teenager will eventually move to topics that are closer to the center of his struggles.

You are earning your teenager's trust with the listening you do on the everyday topics he brings up. The longer you listen with interest and quiet approval, the safer it will get. While you are trying to be patient, your listening partnership is a good place to take your frustrations. Working through your own feelings with an adult listener will speed the process of building trust: as your tensions melt, your teenager will notice that you're more available and more confident in him.

Over days and weeks, safety builds if you continue to be pleased with him. When your teenager senses that things are safe enough between you, a conversation about heavy metal rock can turn into a talk about the cliques at school, and how he has been hurt by them. When it's safe enough, keeping your daughter company in the bathroom while she tries to create a new hairdo can lead to a good cry with you about how she never feels pretty enough.

- **Spend one-on-one time with your teenager, doing what he or she likes to do.**

It's a very busy world we live in, and time alone together for fun and adventure is precious. This kind of time can be a powerful builder of close relationships between parent and child. Going to a baseball game, the video arcade, shopping at the mall, or watching MTV together are the kinds of things you can do with your teenager, once you set up the time. Let your son or daughter decide what the two of you will do. Then, use the time you spend together to listen well, to be enthusiastic about him or her, to openly enjoy being together. Difficult topics and parental complaints should be off limits during one-on-one time. It's a time to build safety, not to invite upset.

One-on-one time is especially important when there is ongoing friction between parent and teenager. The parent's effort to make a good time possible between him and his child helps to rebalance the sagging relationship. Sometimes, this special effort results in some relaxation and real fun for both people. Sometimes, one-on-one time becomes a pretext for the teenager's feelings

of disappointment: the parent tries hard, and the teenager is openly dissatisfied.

We parents must realize that this is one of the common outcomes of giving one-on-one attention to our children. Our attention can magnify our son's or daughter's feelings (which come from times past) that things aren't good enough in some vital way. We need to be prepared to listen and to express caring and love when our teenagers are upset with a time that was supposed to be special. This is the way closer contact is forged: we do our best to care; our teenager tells us about his feelings of not being cared about well enough; we listen and continue to care. Our listening prompts our teenager's feelings to erupt into tears or storming; those feelings that stood between us and our teenager dissolve as they are expressed, and closeness again becomes possible.

- **Handle your own upsets responsibly.**

Try not to spring your gnawing feelings on your child in the middle of a time in which you intended to listen. When teenagers have begun to talk freely, they're taking a chance on you. They're hoping that it's safe to be themselves, safe to expose their thoughts. If you suddenly have blazing feelings about what your son or daughter is telling you, make an effort not to blurt them out. If you can't listen further, just say so, with no blame. You're ripe for some listening time yourself, and this will best be taken with someone other than your teenager, so that the heat of your feelings can be released without targeting or frightening your loved one.

- **Discuss thorny subjects by appointment, not by impulse.**

It's a great help to a teenager to have times with a parent that are relatively free from the parent's upsets and worries. Only your discipline can create this kind of safety. Of course, there need to be times to talk about difficult subjects and to ask hard questions.

We show respect toward our teenagers when we make special appointments with them to tackle gritty topics. Meeting by appointment gives them the chance to think ahead and gather their strength for what may be a difficult discussion. If you make a practice of dealing with tough issues by appointment, your teenager won't have to be wary of you and your upsets at every turn.

- **Building trust is an ongoing process.**

Building trust with your teenager will take time and work on your part. The process can't be hurried. You move into proximity with your child, bringing your interest, patience and confidence. He decides whether or not to take you up on your offer. The results each time you set out to listen can't be predicted. But you can become excellent at making yourself available and trustworthy. Building closeness is a bit like playing outfielder in a baseball game. Your readiness and attention are vital, but you can never predict exactly when you will be called upon, or when you'll have the opportunity to make a significant difference. Your readiness to care is your main responsibility. The rest is a unique and an unfolding story.

- **Help your teenager heal from emotional hurt.**

All of us go through times when feelings of upset capture our attention and spoil our judgment. We can't shake the bad feelings, and the decisions we make while we're upset just don't seem to work out well. When your teenager is in this kind of predicament, you can't fix him. You can't order him not to be confused. You can't insert your reasoning into his mind. Getting angry with him drives him further into that tight, desperate corner.

What can you do to help? What you need to know is that people, your teenager included, do know how to break the stranglehold of bad feelings.

A good chance to laugh, cry, tantrum, or tremble and perspire with upset releases the pent-up feelings, and helps to restore a person's better judgment. In order to give a teenager the chance to rid himself of upset, someone needs to listen and allow the feelings to be shown without criticism, blame or interference.

This process of young people working through feelings until they can think again has been misunderstood in almost every culture and generation. It has been looked upon as disrespect, weakness, stupidity, loss of control, irrationality and impulsiveness. In reality, a person who is crying, storming, or laughing is using his natural ability to clear away irrational feelings by releasing emotional tension. The most progressive thing a listener can do is to lend his full attention so that the feelings can keep flowing until a good measure of healing has taken place.

- **When your teenager brings up feelings, stay and listen.**

When teenagers are grumpy and hard to live with, they are carrying a heavy load of bad feelings. (The same holds true for us.) When things are safe enough (or painful enough) that your teenager begins to let these feelings show, stay with him. Don't talk much, except to say you're sorry that things are that difficult. Don't try to reason the hurt away. Don't defend yourself or your actions. Stay and listen. A natural process is at work. Your child is expelling the bad feelings that have torn his confidence and marred his good judgment.

- **You will probably be the target of your teenager's upset.**

When they feel deeply hurt, most young people feel like their parents are part of the problem, not part of the solution. When your child feels safe enough to release the bad feelings that have been plaguing him, you will very likely be the target of his upset. This is one of the great paradoxes of parenting. When you've forged a strong connection with your child, he feels safe enough

to tell you about the times he's felt hurt, and the hurt will often be blamed on you.

Your teenager needs to cry and rage his bad feelings away. Those feelings, unexpressed, have the power to make him act irrationally. As he works through his upset, he will not make sense. In order to expel bad feelings, he needs to talk, cry, or storm about them. In order to talk, cry or storm freely, he may need someone other than himself to blame.

Many people cannot successfully cry or rage to shed emotional tension if they are blaming themselves. While they blame themselves, they stay sullen, isolated, numb, or caught in some other behavior pattern that doesn't lead them toward connecting with others. When a listener makes an effort to connect with the person who is hurting, the hurt person stops feeling numb and starts feeling hurt. The listener, paying attention and offering support, often becomes the external target for the upset. If the listener can stay supportive, the hurt person's disabling upset will break into healing tears, trembling, or storming as his grief and fear dissolve.

You are not to blame for your teenager's troubles, but your teenager may need to pin his upset on you in order to actively expel it. When he is finished working through his bad feelings, he'll stop pinning the blame on you. Until then, don't argue. While feelings are rolling, the point is to get emotional work done. A more accurate view of reality will be possible when the load of upset has been cleared.

If he can cry, rage, and have you hear him out, the power your teenager's feelings have over his behavior will diminish. If you can listen without reproach or correction, he will gain a clearer perspective on what made his feelings flare, and on you. You will have cared about him when it was very tough to care. You will have helped to drain the feelings that separated the two of you. You won't have attacked him in return. Your teenager will notice that you've been his ally.

- **You may have to juggle conflicting needs.**

If, in the middle of a rush of feelings, your child tells you to go away, you need to cooperate with that request to some extent, or he'll feel that once again, like a million times before, you aren't listening. It may be smart to retreat to the door of his room, or you might say that you'll leave for a couple of minutes, and then come back to see how he is. However, you must try to find a way to stay close by for the duration of the upset. How can your child release the powerful feelings that burden him if there is no one to tell them to? So when you hear "You're no help! Just *leave!*" you must learn to walk a fine line between complying enough to show that you hear his request and respect it, and letting your presence be felt so that the pent-up feelings can finally roll off in tears and trembling.

This kind of listening is very difficult for a parent to do. When our children target us, we get angry and defensive. We can't stand their particular irrationalities. We feel overwhelmed and badly treated. But listening at these times can heal great chasms between us and our children. Under fire, we have to hold on tight to the understanding that they are doing important work. They are unloading the painful emotions that isolate them and separate them from their own best thinking. When the crying or raging has been done, your child will be relieved of that part of his burden, and will be much better able to absorb love, help, and new information. When you have listened through a big upset, you will need time from an adult listener to work through the feelings that were ignited in you as you stood steady in the line of fire.

- **Teenagers may have issues that don't resolve quickly.**

When problems have been sitting with a teenager for a long time, it can take many long cries and upset times before the young person can substantially change his viewpoint and regain his feeling of connection with his family. To help your teenager with this kind of extended project, you'll need to work as fully on your feelings as he does expelling his. The work will be worth it. A young

person's whole personality can change over time with access to a good listener and the permission to work feelings all the way through. Listening to your child's feelings and getting help with your own does work. Listening is not an overnight cure. It is, however, a powerful way to build genuine closeness over time.

- **Setting limits can be an important gateway to the healing process.**

When young people feel pleased, hopeful, and close to others, they make intelligent decisions about their lives. Perhaps not the decisions their parents would make, but decisions that show thought, caring, and confidence in themselves and others. When a young person's judgment has gone awry, emotional upset has trapped his thinking. He has become too isolated, or too discouraged, or too full of some feeling or confusion to function well.

At times like these, the traditional parent approach has been to criticize the child, show the child strong feelings of displeasure, and to tell the child what to do. These are not the actions of a true ally. Neither is it helpful to a young person to let him drift in his upset, passively hoping that he'll figure it all out someday.

We need to learn to move supportively toward a teenager who has become trapped in actions that don't work. He needs to know that we notice the difficulty. He needs us to set reasonable limits for him. And we need to expect that these limits will ignite the upset that smolders in him. We need to be ready to listen.

There is much to learn about setting limits with teenagers. Here is a way to begin:

- **Set up a time to talk about the problem, and let your teenager know what the topic will be.**

Setting limits is best done when your strategy is planned, rather than in the heat of upset. Set an appointment, and prepare by thinking things through with another adult.



- **When tackling problems, remind your teenager that you love him, and that you know how smart and capable he is.**

Setting limits can be an act of genuine caring, and can lead to great relief from upset for your teenager. To give your love a chance to show, you'll need to consciously plan to sprinkle the conversation with validation of your teenager's goodness. Begin your talk with him by appreciating him. You'll need to plan your expression of caring because we parents have a strong tendency to attack the child we are hoping to help. Criticism and attack have no place in the limit-setting process. They signal that we need a listener to help us drain the upsets we've pinned on our teenagers. So prepare yourself with a listening partnership time, or with several. Clear away your own bad feelings so you can show your child your caring as you help him make a course correction in his life.

- **Pick important issues.  
Emphasize the principles involved.**

Setting limits constructively with teenagers takes careful thought and work on our own upsets. Choose your challenges carefully. Make sure that you spend your efforts on course corrections that are vital, not on issues that are matters of taste or personal preference. When you must set limits, decide upon the limit you will set. Then try to keep the conversation focused on the principle behind the correction you insist upon.

For example, perhaps you are insisting that your teenager call you at ten PM on weekends to let you know where he is because he has been known to spend time late at night unsupervised. He will likely have lots of arguments about how inconvenient this will be, how his friends don't have to do this, and how he might be at the movies or driving with a friend, so he couldn't call you right at ten. Keep asserting your faith that he can think, he can problem-solve, he is intelligent, and that to do your job as

his parent, you need to know where he is. 10 PM, 9:45, 10:10 all would be OK. The important thing is that he inform you about his whereabouts.

- **Give information about how you feel, and why.**

While criticism and attack are not helpful in a talk about limits, sometimes information about what feelings you have around a particular issue can help your teenager understand the situation fully. Rather than attack with “Your irresponsibility drives me crazy! Why don’t you let me know where you are? You just don’t think about anyone else! You think you’re the only person on this planet, and you’re not!” your teenager will be better informed about the situation if you say, “When you don’t let me know where you are, it makes me feel frustrated, because I depend on you for this information. And when I don’t hear from you for hours, I get scared. It makes me feel like a bad parent.” Save the heat of the feelings you are describing for your listening partnership time.

- **Set limits that lead toward independent functioning.**

When you set a limit, create a path toward success. Using our example, you might let your teenager know that when he calls in at ten PM for three outings in a row, the next outing he has the choice of calling once, anytime before eleven PM. If he complains that he loses track of time, take the problem seriously. Loan him a watch with an alarm. Do what you can to make it possible for your teenager to succeed at moving step by step toward thoughtful functioning.

- **Set up a future time for the two of you to evaluate how things are going, and to reconsider the limits you’ve set.**

It helps if both parent and teenager can see the limit as a necessary experiment, rather than as a police action. Try to be rigorous about sticking to the experiment for a reasonable length of time,

and then, together, look at the results, study what went well and what didn't, and think about the situation afresh. To understand how your limits worked, your teenager's point of view is essential. So at the outset, appoint a time when the two of you will talk again about the limits you've set and whether the issue is resolving. When you meet to evaluate, remember to appreciate your teenager's efforts, even if things haven't gone perfectly (they seldom do). Then ask him what he thinks went well, and what needs to be changed or improved. Be prepared to listen to feelings, as well as thinking—if his judgment is still impaired, he will still have some emotional tension to work through, and his intelligence may take advantage of this opportunity to work on upset.

- **When you find yourself attacking your teenager, stop.**

Most of us had parents who set limits harshly, even abusively. So we don't often manage to tackle difficult issues without argument, criticism, or heated emotions. When your effort to communicate with your teenager catches fire and burns, stop. Don't try to continue the conversation. You need a listener, so you can work in private on the frustration, fear and grief that have welled up. Listeners don't usually appear when we need them, so for the moment, give yourself "time out." Leave the room and take a walk, pound on a pillow, or pace your bedroom until you cool down. Do something that is active enough to let you release some of the physical fight-or-flight energy that comes along with strong feelings. Plan to get a listening session to address your feelings in full. Later, apologize. It makes a big difference to our children when we acknowledge the mistakes we make when our feelings overwhelm us.

- **When the issue is immediate and involves a real threat to your child or to someone else, act decisively to set the limit.**

There may be exceptional times when you must intervene on the spur of the moment, because immediate harm may be done. A teenager who is involved in a drug addiction or who can't

resist drinking and driving, for instance, is one who is crying out for firm help from an ally. At those times, it's best to act to stop the irrational behavior, rather than issue orders. When teenagers are determined to endanger themselves or others, they are not likely to respond to limits that are verbally set. At these times, move decisively to set the limit, but don't attack your teenager, and don't try to discuss the entire situation. Your teenager will be full of feelings, and discussion won't work at this time. If you move effectively (for instance, holding a family meeting to insist that he stop his drug use, or taking away his car keys immediately), heavy feelings will surface. Try to stay for the duration. He needs your determination not to allow harm to come to him. He also needs your presence while he shows the hurt that has been festering. You are healing force when you stay close and continue to care through the storm.

How young people, and the rest of us, work through the irrational feelings that fuel our flare-ups and our mistakes in judgment is outlined in a series of booklets called *Listening to Children*, published by **Hand in Hand**. Although primarily written for parents of younger children, the information contained is quite pertinent to parents of teenagers. These booklets will give you further perspective on how young people recover their confidence after they've been hurt, and how we can be their allies in this process.

## **Respect, Support and Enjoy Your Teenager**

To build an independent life, every child needs at least one person who believes in him, remembers his goodness, and lets him know that he is wanted and loved. This kind of support is vital in a child's early years, and is the backbone of a teenager's successful passage through adolescence. It's easy to misinterpret our children's physical maturity as a sign that they don't need the "baby stuff" of appreciation, affection, warmth and encouragement anymore. But our teenagers are going through an intense learning period. To learn rapidly and well, your teenager needs your unshakable support. He needs you to express that support in words, tone, and caring attention.

- **Show respect for your teenager.**  
**Praise the good you see.**

Remember that your teenager is subject to criticism daily for the smallest things. You can counterbalance this lack of respect by letting your teenager know that you value him. His smile, his taste in clothes, his love of music, his sense of adventure, his thoughtfulness in keeping his mess more or less confined to his room—you can find many things to praise and enjoy. If you can't think of things you appreciate about your teenager, find a listener, and talk about the things that bug you. When you've talked long enough, you'll be able to remember what you enjoy.

We grownups have the hardest time keeping an independent perspective on our teenagers. We get swayed by the cookie-cutter measures of success our society has adopted—popular child, good athlete, decent grades, wholesome friends, no weird clothing. When our teenagers turn out to be unique individuals, with their special talents and their own interesting ways of tackling (or not tackling) adversity, we may feel uptight and ashamed. Any difficulty you have approving of your teenager is a serious roadblock to a good relationship, and it's one you must move if you are to be trusted.

So find a listener, and in your protected time with that listener, take an attitude of pride in your child. Try to reclaim your ability to approve of him and love him openly, difficulties and all. Perhaps you'll need to recall times when he was a child, before troubles hardened between the two of you, in order to regain access to positive feelings about him. You may laugh as you do this, and tears may not be far behind—these feelings are a sign that your upset with your child is healing. Pride in our children, no matter what troubles they've collected along the way, is an important direction for parents. Without it, we can't be full allies to them as they wrestle with the issues they must resolve.

- **Support your teenager's sense of fun and play.**

Your teenager needs your unwavering support for keeping fun in his life.

He may need you to give him bus fare to see the friends he laughs most with. He may need you to be delighted when he and his friends, who were watching a video, begin to laugh and stuff popcorn down each other's shirts. In the all-too-serious business of building a grownup identity, your help in keeping laughter and play a regular part of his life will be invaluable.

In particular, teenagers are relieved and feel closer to us when they have a chance to play with us. Here is the account of one mother, who figured out how to play well with her teenage son:

“Jerry is fifteen now, and he's much bigger than I am. He used to chase me, and get me down and tickle me to death. And he just loves that, absolutely loves that. Now, he'll take a stinky shoe or a stinky sock, and chase me around, or pick his toenails and try to gross me out with what he found. This kind of play is really good, because he's so big and strong; it's a way we can have fun. He laughs and laughs, and so do I.”

Pillow fights, water fights, wrestling and chasing are the kinds of things that help teenagers remember that life is good, and that we are on their side. We have to be careful not to win, but to put up a good fight. Teenagers enjoy a good, active contest, but they must be safe from humiliation and defeat when they play with us. Young people face threats aplenty in the world outside our families. Play with us should contain no chance that they will be found lacking in strength or cleverness.

- **Be affectionate with your teenager.**

A teenager's needs for affection aren't that different from his needs when he was three or four years old. Affection is still one of the most powerful ways to communicate to a person that he

is wanted and loved. Don't curtail your hugs, wrestling around, hair-ruffling, cuddling while watching TV, or snuggling at bed time just because your child is growing up. The bonds between you are nurtured by the traditions of affection that you started when your child was young.

If you have let cuddling and affection lapse, start it up again, a little here and a little there. Your teenager may make disdainful noises as you begin showing affection again: "Oh, Mom!" or "Geez, Dad, you pat me like I'm your dog!" These noises mark the territory that must be won back if the two of you are to regain your ability to have affection flow easily between you. Don't take the criticism as a signal to stop, but listen carefully. Your child may be telling you how your own embarrassment makes you stiff and awkward.

One warning: let your teenager determine how much affection is shown between the two of you when his friends are around, at least at first. Your son or daughter may be subject to harsh ridicule because of any missteps you make in this area.

- **Maintain a hopeful attitude.**

Make it your job to identify and tackle any feelings of doubt about your teenager's capabilities, and any cynicism you may have about the world in general. Young people face quite a load of discouragement every day, and they don't need us to add our own to the heap. The news media concentrate on problems, seldom on solutions. The information we get is about scoundrels, not heroes. Our children need us to fill this gap by exposing them to ideas that are useful and workable. They need us to bring people into our lives who are working to make the world a better place. Their confusion won't be as deep if we work to supply hope and determination to make life good.

We parents can do much to counter the harshness of adolescent life. We help our teenagers when we maintain an attitude of respect and interest, hopefulness about their future, affection, playfulness, and confidence in their abilities. We don't have to be perfect parents to

give our children pivotal support. What they need from us is our commitment to work to maintain a genuine appreciation for them. They need us to work to be allies to them in their struggles. As we do this work, we satisfy our desire to love our children with all that we have. The rewards of parenting continue because we remain active parents. We continue to think, listen, and take initiative. And we create a foundation of trust and caring which allows our teenagers to grow and thrive.



### *Our Mission*

**Hand in Hand** improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the *Parenting by Connection* approach and *Listening Tools* for parents and professionals, contact:

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# Literature List

The *Listening Tools* employed in the *Parenting by Connection* approach are fully described in the following **Hand in Hand** literature:

Items marked \* are available in Spanish

## Booklets

- \* *Parenting by Connection*
- \* *Listening: A Tool for Caring Parents*
- \* *Listening to Children: Seven-booklet set includes How Children's Emotions Work, Special Time, Playlistening, Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears, and Reaching for Your Angry Child*  
(also available in Chinese and Japanese)
- \* *Setting Limits with Children*
- \* *Supporting Adolescents*
- \* *Listening to Parents: Listening Partnerships for Parents*
- \* *Listening to Parents: Leading a Parent Resource Group*

## Audio

*Listening to Children: Audio version of the six-booklet set above*  
(on CD)

- \* *Cómo Fijar Límites a Nuestros Niños: Spanish audio version of Setting Limits with Children* (on audiotape)

## Videotapes

*Setting Limits with Children*, 61 minutes

*Playlistening*, 39 minutes

All are by Patty Wipfler, and can be purchased online at [www.handinhandparenting.org](http://www.handinhandparenting.org) or by calling **Hand in Hand** at 650 322-5323.